



January 8, 2023

RECEIVED
02/08/2023

Honorable David Alvarez
Chair, Joint Legislative Audit Committee
1020 N Street, Room 107
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Audit of Medi-Cal and the Department of Managed Health Care to assess the lack of access to timely care for child behavioral health services

Dear Chair Alvarez and Members of the Committee:

I am writing to respectfully request the Joint Legislative Audit Committee approve a state audit regarding the lack of timely access to behavioral health services for children in the Medi-Cal and California Children's Services (CCS) programs. The goal of the audit is to understand how long it is taking for children to access behavioral health services and the reasons for the lack of timely access to these services. Additionally, what is the impact on these children's health when they are not able to timely access behavioral health services?

Background

Medi-Cal is responsible for providing comprehensive health benefits to more than 6,000,000 children, which is more than 60% of the children in California. Medi-Cal contracts with health plan networks to provide care to their enrollees. The Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), along with the Department of Managed Health Care (DMHC), are responsible for ensuring health plans provide timely access to health care as required under current law. Health plan networks, providing care to Medi-Cal enrollees, must be adequate to meet the timely access standards, which include specific timeframes under which enrollees must be able to obtain care as established under current law. These standards include wait times to access urgent and non-urgent care appointments, as well as the availability of telephone triage or screening services during and after regular business hours. The specific wait times for appointments in current law for Medi-Cal or CCS enrollees include urgent care appointments within four days and non-urgent appointments within 10-15 days.

If a child has a certain chronic medical condition, they may be included in the CCS program which provides diagnostic and treatment services, medical case management, and physical and occupational therapy services to more than 185,000 children under age 21 with CCS-eligible medical conditions. Examples of CCS-eligible conditions include, but are not limited to, chronic

medical conditions such as cystic fibrosis, hemophilia, cerebral palsy, heart disease, cancer, traumatic injuries, and infectious diseases producing major sequelae. The CCS program is administered as a partnership between county health departments and the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS). The CCS program is also subject to timely access and wait time standards as described above and DHCS is responsible to ensure those standards are met.

Need for Audit

I am concerned California is not fulfilling its obligation to ensure children enrolled in Medi-Cal or the CCS program are obtaining behavioral health services within the timely access standards under existing law. I am aware of numerous examples of the challenges for children in the Medi-Cal or CCS programs to access behavioral health services in a timely manner. In some instances, care is not received at all due to no available behavioral health providers. I have heard anecdotal stories of children attempting to take their lives after not being able to access behavioral health services for months. The State Auditor released an audit in September of 2020 looking at Youth Suicide Prevention and found “suicides of youth ages 12 to 19 increased by 15% percent statewide from 2009 to 2018. In addition, instances of youth committing acts of self-harm – behavior that is self-directed and deliberate results in injury – increased by 50 percent during the same period.”¹

DMHC just released its annual Timely Access Report for 2021. The report shows of the 20 health plans with Medi-Cal products that were surveyed, the range of appointments available within the required wait timeframes ranged from 92% to 45%. What was missing from this report was any information on how long the wait times were or what happened to the patient as a result of the long wait times? It is important to not only understand if the timely access standards are met but it is also critically important to see how long it actually takes for a child to get an appointment for behavioral health services. It is also important for the Legislature and public to further understand what the impact is by not meeting the timely access standards. What was the health impact on the child for not getting to a behavioral health provider for three months?

Scope of Audit

An audit could investigate the following questions as it relates to oversight at the Department of Health Care Services and the Department of Managed Health Care to understand in more detail:

1. How long does it take for children to obtain behavioral health appointments in the Medi-Cal program and CCS program?
2. What are the reasons for the delays in timely access to receive behavioral health services?
3. Are there any trends as it relates to delays in timely access to behavioral health services for certain ethnic groups? Are the delays universal across all ethnic groups? Are there any trends in access for certain regions of the state? Or any trends for certain medical

¹ Auditor of the State of California 2020, Youth Suicide Prevention, accessed February 2023, <https://www.auditor.ca.gov/pdfs/reports/2019-125.pdf>

conditions?

4. What has been the impact on health care for children not being able to access behavioral health services in a timely manner?
5. What are some recommendations for the Medi-Cal and CCS programs to address the lack of timely access to behavioral health care?
6. The State Auditor should look at emergency department (ED) visits for children needing behavioral health services. What has been the trend over the past five years? What is the breakdown in payer source for these visits? Are more from state programs versus commercial insurance?

We request an audit take place as soon as possible to help inform the Legislature of the larger impact of the lack of timely access to behavioral health services. Understanding not only how long it is taking to receive behavioral health services but also the impact on the health of children by not being able to access the care timely will help direct the Legislature on how to better address the issue.

Sincerely,



Assemblymember Akilah Weber, M.D.
79th Assembly District